Imagine All the People:

Contact Interventions and Prejudice Towards Immigrants in Schools

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Lead

The world that John Lennon imagined in 1971 seems like a far cry from the one we see today. In our increasingly globalized world, rather than sharing among people, recent years have seen a sharp rise in anti-immigrant sentiment in society, and in social exclusion of immigrants, including among children in schools. But John Lennon might not have been far from the mark in suggesting that the power of imagining more harmonious group relations. Research suggests that interventions grounded in imagined intergroup contact (i.e., imagined interaction between social groups) may improve social relations, and reduce prejudice. Such interventions have much promise, but has research shown that they can change behavior towards immigrants? In this article, I highlight how this body of psychological research might inform educational interventions that aim to reduce this prejudice.

Imagine All the People:

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You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope some day you'll join us

And the world will be as one

The division-free world that John Lennon imagined in 1971 seems like a far cry from the one we see today. The wake of the EU referendum in the UK in 2016 saw a 42% rise in hate crime towards immigrants (peaking the day after the result was announced). This rise was attributed by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2016) to negative portrayals of immigrants by politicians and the media. An anti-immigrant rhetoric continues in US and European media today (Moore & Ramsay, 2017), and this anti-immigrant sentiment has penetrated schools (Taylor, 2015). Concurrently, research has found a high degree of loneliness amongst adolescent immigrants, with 20% of one sample reporting feeling that they do not belong (Oxman-Martinez et al., 2012). It is known that immigrants may be particularly vulnerable to anxiety and depression arising from intergroup prejudice (Strohmeier, Kärnä, & Salmivalli, 2011). Moreover, when negative discrimination targets someone's race or ethnicity, the psychological impact may be greater, as an immigrant identity is an unchangeable and core part of that person's identity (McKenney, Pepler, Craig, & Connolly, 2006). The risks to wellbeing surrounding prejudice highlighted above, together with research showing that high quality contact with immigrants benefits harmonious group relations for everyone (e.g., Vezzali

Capozza, Giovannini, & Stathi, 2012) mean that timely, evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing prejudice towards immigrants in schools are needed.

In spite of increasing research on the *content* of intergroup attitudes in children and adolescents, interventions to *reduc*e prejudice in childhood are not commonly implemented, and seem rarely to draw upon developmental or social psychology (Killen, Rutland, & Ruck, 2011). Instead programs focus on the use of print and multimedia-based intervention programs without addressing the social context or developmental nuances in which the interventions are set (see Paluck & Green, 2009). This is despite there being a burgeoning body of social-developmental research, which highlights that intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) might usefully be applied to anti-immigrant prejudice in schools, hints at the mechanisms that underpin that prejudice, and at the interventions that might promote harmonious intergroup relations. Contact theory is based on the now well-established premise that positive contact (meeting Allport's conditions of co-operation, common goals, equal social status, and institutional support) between members of different groups can ameliorate intergroup attitudes. Contact may be direct (for example, involving cross-group friendships between individuals) or indirect (not involving contact between group members, but grounded in the finding that knowledge or imagination of ingroup members' amiable relationships with outgroup members can bring about more positive intergroup attitudes). Indeed, research suggests that Lennon might not have been far from the mark in looking to the power of *imagining* more harmonious group relations. Here, I review evidence for interventions arising from intergroup contact theory in its indirect forms that aims to reduce prejudice and thereby promote the social inclusion of immigrant youth.

Extended Contact Interventions

Extended contact is based in other ingroup members' positive relationships with an outgroup member (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). The evidence that it may help to reduce prejudice in schools where direct contact is not feasible is growing. Along these lines, Cameron Rutland, Brown, and Douch (2006) read stories to British children about other British children interacting positively with a refugee child. Attitudes toward refugee children were more positive among children in the intervention condition, compared to their counterparts in a control group. Beyond this, Vezzali et al. (2012) examined the effects of extended contact among Italian primary school children. Here, extended contact was linked to reduced implicit prejudice, but only for those who themselves had fewer immigrant friends. This parallels research in the UK which showed that an extended contact intervention markedly reduced explicit prejudice in a non-diverse location but had little effect in an ethnically diverse area (Cameron, Rutland, & Hossain, 2011). Further, a study of children from an ethnically diverse community in Germany, (Feddes, Noack, & Rutland, 2009) found that direct but not extended contact between German and Turkish children as associated with positive outgroup ethnic attitudes. In other words, the evidence on extended contact suggests that it reduces biases against ethnic minority groups or immigrants particularly effectively when direct contact between different groups does not occur.

The Power of Imagination

The other form of indirect contact, known as *imagined contact,* is "the mental simulation of a social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category" (Crisp & Turner, 2009, p. 234). What might this add to interventions intending to reduce prejudice? Unlike direct or extended contact, imagined contact does not require someone to be living where they have contact with outgroup members, or where other outgroup members have a good relationship with

someone in the ingroup. Rather, it is practical where intergroup bias is likely to take shape without being challenged (e.g., Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005). This means imagined contact has the potential to be of use in low diversity settings where children experience anti-immigrant prejudice.

There is now a growing body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of imagined intergroup contact in attenuating prejudice among young people (e.g., Stathi, Cameron, Hartley, & Bradford, 2014; Cameron, Rutland, Turner, Holman-Nicolas, & Powell, 2011). Regarding immigrants, Vezzali, et al. (2012) conducted a three-week study where Italian children imagined an outing with an immigrant child in different social settings. Afterwards, compared to a control condition, children in the imagined intergroup contact condition had firmer intentions to meet immigrant children and less implicit prejudice towards them. When it comes to adolescents, Turner, West, and Christie (2013) showed British students aged 16–17 years a picture of an asylum seeker from Zimbabwe. Those who imagined contact with the asylum seeker reported a stronger inclination befriend asylum seekers than did a control group.

In my research, (Jones, Rutland & Rea, 2017) my colleagues and I have examined the effectiveness of a novel form of imagined contact with immigrants. We reasoned that contact will be more effective, when it actively involves the child, as opposed to learning about intergroup interactions through books or television. Developmental research tells us that children will pay more attention when key features of the world are perceptually salient (Brainerd & Reyna, 1990) and the social group memberships taking part in an interaction are rendered highly visible (Cameron, Rutland et al., 2006). We carried out imagined contact via pretend play with toys, where children imagined interacting in a physical space. We found that the attitudes of British children aged between 5- 9 years from an ethnically and culturally diverse area were moderated

positively by imagined contact with an immigrant. Together these studies suggest that imagined contact may be an effective and flexible strategy that is easily adaptable to the age group being targeted.

Beyond Imagination

The study of imagined contact holds promise for the reduction of anti-immigrant prejudice. Studies show that outgroup attitudes become more positive and friendship intentions stronger following such interventions. However, there is one gap in the literature that it will be important for future research to address. The nature and power of children's imaginations has arguably yet to be fully harnessed. Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza, and Trifiletti (2015) uncovered something of the potential for channeling children's imaginations in their study. They showed that stories about extended contact are valuable even when the contact does not involve an ingroup member, or real-life social groups. In their study, primary school children read passages that presented themes of prejudice from J. K. Rowling *Harry Potter* books, over a six week period. They found this was effective in weakening prejudice towards immigrants: an indication that the power of children's imaginations may be exploited to enhance the positive impact of imagined contact. Relatedly, there is evidence that combining the power of children's imaginations may be a fruitful endeavor. Vezzali, Stathi, Crisp, and Capozza (2015) examined whether imagined contact could be performed collectively. Italian and immigrant primary school children aged 8-10 years worked in small groups of three to six children. In an imagined *intergroup* contact condition, in each small group, children were provided with a minimal group classification, yellow or blue, (each small group included members from both groups). In the *intragroup* (control) imagined contact condition, instead, children imagined all being assigned to the blue group. Direct contact between immigrants and Italian children was manipulated

orthogonally to the imagined contact conditions. Children in all conditions were asked to cooperate towards a superordinate goal. Results showed positive effects of both direct and imagined contact on reduced stereotyping of immigrants, and intentions to help them if they needed it. Importantly, for considering the collective power of imagination, there was no evidence that direct contact has stronger effects than imagined contact in this study. Both of these studies show that children's imaginations may be exploited to enhance the positive influence of imagined contact on anti-immigrant attitudes. With this in mind, it seems that the furtherance of contact interventions to reduce prejudice towards immigrants is now limited only by the researchers' imaginations.

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